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DEPT FOR EUR/AGS, INR/EU, AND EUR/PPD FOR YVETTE SAINT-ANDRE
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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: July 11, 2007

Second Day of Coalition Meeting

¶1. Austria's coalition partners, the Social Democrats and the People's Party, are gathering in the Burgenland provincial capital of Eisenstadt for the second day of closed-door meetings on key policy issues. Following a first round of talks yesterday, the leaders of the SPOe and the OeVP pledged to try resolving their differences on policy, which have marked the first six months of the grand coalition government. They are also going to plan for the next parliamentary period. Austrian media comment that the results of the meeting so far have been "quite meager."

Reporting like all Austrian media on the SPOe-OeVP government meeting currently underway in Burgenland, independent provincial daily Salzburger Nachrichten comments: "Grand coalition negligible success." After months of disputes over key issues, including the Eurofighter purchase for Austria's armed forces, the "coalition partners refrained from fighting at the closed-door meeting." However, this was "only because they gave the real hot topics a wide berth. Agreements were reached on marginal issues exclusively," the daily says. Mass-circulation daily Kurier meanwhile says that Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer came across as "self-critical" in an interview with the daily: "The government only has itself to blame for its poor image," Gusenbauer told the newspaper, and emphasized that he wants the quarrels within the coalition to end.

City and Federal Government Fail to Act on Cemetery

¶2. Instead of taking the volunteers from the US Embassy as an example, who started cleaning a historic Jewish cemetery in Vienna's 18th district to prevent the site from complete disrepair, the City of Vienna and the federal government have both chosen to remain silent on the issue, particularly on the question of who is to bear the costs of the cemetery's urgently necessary renovation.

Reporting on recent efforts by US Embassy representatives to preserve the historic Jewish cemetery in Vienna's 18th district, mass-circulation tabloid Kronen Zeitung says that as both the federal and the Vienna city authorities are apparently washing their hands of the issue, more volunteers will likely be needed to guarantee the site's renovation. This is a "sad state of affairs" for one of Vienna's cultural monuments, the Kronen Zeitung criticizes. Austrian historian Tina Walzer is now looking for additional volunteers to help clean the cemetery from weeds and shrubs and to clear walking paths, the daily says.

Deal Agreed On Brenner Tunnel

¶13. The Austrian, Italian and German transport ministers signed a memorandum of understanding earlier this week on building a tunnel through the Brenner Pass. The massive infrastructure project is designed to ease the impact of transit traffic through the Austrian Alps. Last year 1.9 million trucks used the Brenner Pass. Reporting on the agreement between the Austrian, Italian and German transport ministers on building the Brenner Tunnel, semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung explains that the construction of the tunnel is expected to cost six billion Euros. The deal envisages that the costs be shared between Austria, Italy and the European Union. The long delayed project is designed to relieve road traffic through the Brenner Pass connecting Germany with northern Italy via the Austrian Alps. At 63 kilometers long, the Brenner Tunnel will be the longest in the world. The agreement signed on Tuesday is a breakthrough on the project which has been under discussion between Austria and Brussels for nearly a decade.

Pakistan: Islamist Leader Abdul Rashid Ghazi Killed

¶14. Pakistan's army says the operation against radical Islamists in Islamabad's Red Mosque is in its final stages. The mosque's militant cleric, Abdul Rashid Ghazi, and around 50 of his supporters have been killed since troops stormed the complex early yesterday. Fighting continued this morning, and about 50 women and children have been freed from inside the mosque. An Austrian foreign editor says that although the chances for the standoff at the mosque being resolved peacefully were slim to begin with, the latest developments will only strengthen Pakistan's radical forces. Independent provincial daily Salzburger Nachrichten analyzes the recent developments in Pakistan, and says that after the bloodbath at the Red Mosque in Islamabad, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf can no longer afford his policy of appeasement towards the fundamentalists. The crisis is affecting a head of state who can count on the support of the Western world, because he is a key ally in the fight against terrorism. For now, Musharraf still has the backing of the Pakistani army, but it remains to be seen how much longer they'll be willing to support him in his conflict with the country's radical Islamic forces. Meanwhile, in centrist daily Die Presse, foreign affairs writer Thomas Seifert comments that the violent conflict over the Red Mosque is "occurring in a country that is currently in a deep crisis." The greatest threat to President Musharraf is the "diverse and complex Islamic movement in the country. Before 9/11, these extremist elements were welcome accomplices in Pakistan's struggle with India over the province of Kashmir, but in the wake of the September 11 attacks in the US, such unholy alliances could no longer be sustained," Seifert says.

Bush Calls for More Time on Iraq

¶15. US President George Bush has rejected calls for the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq ahead of the publication of a status report on Iraq due this week. Instead, he urged Congress to give the recent surge in troop numbers more time to work. The Iraqi Foreign Minister has meanwhile warned that Iraq would disintegrate if troops were withdrawn too soon, and emphasized the danger of civil war or a wider regional conflict. According to an Austrian daily, rejection of President Bush's Iraq policy has reached a new all-time high in the US: A survey revealed that 62 percent of Americans believe the deployment of troops to Iraq was a mistake. Reporting on the United States' Iraq policy, liberal daily Der Standard suggests there are "signals of a potential retreat operation." The only one in the US "still talking about US success in Iraq" is Fred Kagan of the American Enterprise Institute, the daily says. Half a year after the presented proposal for the military "surge" to stabilize Iraq, virtually no-one talks about victory any longer. Instead, debates in the US are focusing on potential scenarios for a strategic retreat. General David Petraeus, too, has warned that US efforts in Iraq could yet take another ten years. In Washington, there is no one who wants to imagine US soldiers still stationed in Iraq in 2017, despite the fact that the White House has been dismissing alleged plans for a troop pullout, says the Standard, and adds that according to military experts, the American forces are no longer in a position to carry out the tasks

the supporters of the troop surge have cut out for them. Kagan critic James Miller has meanwhile suggested that the US should focus on three key criteria regarding Iraq: The country must not become a long-term safe haven for al Qaeda; regional wars between Sunnis and Shiites, as well as a Shiite genocide of Sunnis must be prevented. According to Miller, this was in the United States' own interest. It would be unrealistic to believe more could still be accomplished.

McCaw